

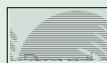


# Burma Action Ireland

Spring 2005

## Newsletter

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# Burma, beyond the silence

## Public meetings in Galway, Dublin and Belfast

**H**arn Yawngwhe, director of the Brussels-based Euro Burma office, arrived in Dublin on 6 February last for a series of three public meetings organised by Burma Action Ireland (BAI), on the theme of 'Burma – Beyond The Silence'. Harn, a former special advisor to Dr Sein Win - Burma's Prime Minister in Exile, spoke about the latest political developments in Burma. Topics covered included the December tsunami, the current status of Aung San Suu Kyi - Burma's democratically elected leader - and the ongoing human rights abuses in Burma.

The three meetings were well attended and BAI is very grateful for all those who came out and showed their interest and support. In addition to Harn as guest speaker at all three locations, **Hugh Baxter**, the Chairperson of BAI also spoke about the work of this voluntary organisation in Ireland. In Galway at the SIPTU venue in Forster Court (7 February) they were joined by guest speakers, the Mayor of Galway, Councillor **Catherine Connolly** and Dr **Kathleen Cavanaugh** (Lecturer in

Human Rights, NUI, Galway).

In Dublin's Mansion House on Tuesday 8 February, with the venue kindly provided by the Lord Mayor, **Councillor Michael Conaghan**, the guest speakers included **David Joyce** (Development Education Officer, Irish Congress of Trade Unions) and **Muireann O Briain SC** (Child Protection Consultant). In Belfast City Hall on 9 February, guest speakers included the Lord Mayor of Belfast, **Councillor Tom Ekin**, **Carmel Hanna** MLA (Chairperson of the all-party International Development Group) and **Patrick Corrigan** (Programme Director, Amnesty International).

Speaking about Aung San Suu Kyi, who is currently enduring detention in Rangoon, Harn Yawngwhe said: "She used to be visited every day by her physician. Now she is only allowed a visit once a week. She has access to far fewer people than she had under previous house arrests." (Daw Suu Kyi has endured three separate periods of detention totalling over 9 years since 1989).

On Burmese military plans for a new



Harn Yawngwhe with the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Tom Ekin, at Belfast City Hall on 9 February.

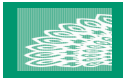
constitution, Mr Yawngwhe said: "The new constitution will bar her from any political involvement. So even if they have free elections she won't be able to take part in them."

Mr Yawngwhe urged all attendees at the meetings both north and south to write to their public representatives - Ministers for Foreign Affairs, local TDs/cabinet ministers/MEPs to let them know of their concern for human rights in Burma and to urge them to raise the Burma issue at every level of the political process.

In addition to the public meetings, Hugh Baxter and Harn Yawngwhe had a productive meeting on 2 March with Mr **Dermot Ahern, TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs**. This was BAI's first meeting with the Minister since he came to office last year. The points discussed at the three public meetings, were raised with Mr Ahern. The Minister re-affirmed the Irish government's support for efforts to bring about a transition to democracy in Burma.



Pictured at the Burma public meeting in Galway are (left to right) Harn Yawngwhe (Euro Burma Office), Mayor of Galway; Councillor Catherine Connolly; Dr. Kathleen Cavanaugh (Lecturer in Human Rights, NUI, Galway); Hugh Baxter, Chairperson, BAI.



# ASEAN's changing stance on Burma

Burma is under pressure to implement democratic reforms or risk losing its chance to assume chairmanship of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2006.

Breaking established diplomatic practice, government MPs in Malaysia plan to table a motion calling for a block on Burma's chairmanship, unless Aung San Suu Kyi is released from detention in Rangoon and political reform is initiated. This motion by Malaysia, (who once diligently pushed for Burma's inclusion) respects ASEAN boundaries of non-interference and constructive engagement, while significantly pressurising Burma.

The decision, reached at a recent meeting led by Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, marks growing unease among ASEAN's core members, concerning the damage Burma's chairmanship could inflict on its credibility and relations with western governments. It reflects the mounting frustration of regional neighbours like Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore, at the price ASEAN is paying at this time, for lack of political progress and change in Burma. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand, who has unreservedly backed the Burmese regime, is reluctant to become an active player in the matter, planning instead to continue engaging with Thailand's neighbour. On 11 April, while on a retreat in the central Philippine island of Cebu, Southeast Asian foreign ministers failed to reach a consensus on the chairmanship issue. As Burma was not

formally taken up during the sessions, they decided to defer the decision until an ASEAN ministerial meeting in Laos in July.

Burma, admitted into ASEAN in 1997, has repeatedly ignored international calls for political reform. In 2003, with ASEAN's approval, Burma adopted a road map for restoring democracy, but it has since failed to advance it significantly. The junta has also shown little interest in further efforts by the UN special envoy and former Malaysian diplomat Razali Ismail to foster dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest. They refuse to move from their hard-line policies, which have engendered political oppression and flagrant violations of human rights. Burma's National Convention - which is aimed at drafting a new constitution for Burma - has been thoroughly discredited (and was very recently put on hold until after the rainy season)\*. The regime will however continue to push for its conclusion, and use it as proof of Burma's path to democracy and to perpetuate its grip on power.

Since 1997, ASEAN has kept collective silence and preserved solidarity, while accepting numerous transgressions by Burma's junta. This was in accordance with the grouping's rule of non-intervention in members' internal affairs. ASEAN firmly and successfully resisted EU efforts to exclude Burma from an Asean-EU summit in Hanoi last year. However, an editorial in the Thai newspaper, *The Nation*, highlights the shift in thought: "ASEAN realises that having Burma as a member has been a liability, making the grouping a target for

international ridicule and criticism."

ASEAN punches above the diplomatic weight of its members. It holds annual meetings on political, security and economic issues that are attended by the US, Europe, Russia, China, Japan and a number of smaller Asia-Pacific countries. Burma's membership has been a growing irritant in relations between ASEAN and western countries. With the forthcoming prospect of a military junta now setting ASEAN's direction, members are getting worried.

The European Commission has also called on Burma to meet key demands, notably to free Aung San Suu Kyi, launch a truly inclusive national dialogue for reconciliation and for all parties to participate in the National Convention.

So far, the generals have done whatever they pleased with impunity. However growing pressure from ASEAN's individual members could result in common action, if pressure is co-ordinated and the sentiments shared by all members. At this time, it is looking as if another important political endeavour might be taken by ASEAN since its 1996 history-making steps with the political crisis in Cambodia.

Under ASEAN rules, members elect the chairman, allowing a formal basis for blocking Burma's chairmanship. To avoid embarrassment, diplomats say Burma could voluntarily turn down the chairmanship.

*\*See update on Burma, page three, for a note on the National Convention.*

## European Burma groups meet in Geneva

Twenty-four organisations, including representatives of BAI, who together form part of the Euro Burma Network (EBN), met from 19-20 March in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) head-

quarters in Geneva. The group agreed priorities for co-ordinated lobbying and campaigning over the next six months. As part of a joint initiative, the EBN has formally asked the EU to make a

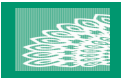
statement clarifying its position on Burma's 2006 chairmanship of ASEAN - the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, if the military government has not agreed to the minimum standards set by the EU to ensure that Burma's National Convention is democratic. The minimum standards set by the EU are the release of Daw Suu Kyi and others in her party, to participate freely in the Convention.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN, was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok by the five original member countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Burma in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. The ASEAN region has a population of about 500 million, a total area of 4.5 million square kilometers, (France has an area of 547,000 square kilometers), a combined gross domestic product of US\$737 billion, and a total trade of US\$720 billion.

*See also the related article on this page: ASEAN's changing stance on Burma.*



*Burma solidarity group representatives at the Inter-Parliamentary Union headquarters in Geneva in March.*



# Update on Burma

### WEATHER BLAMED FOR HALTING OF NATIONAL CONVENTION

According to the Reuters news agency, Burma's military regime adjourned its much-criticised talks to draw up a new democratic constitution on 31 March last. Blaming hot temperatures, the approaching monsoon and pressure on farmers to tend their crops, officials organising the National Convention suggested that their forum would not restart until after the annual rainy season - November 2005 at the earliest. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party boycotted last year's opening session of the Convention. That session ran from May to July 2004 and the forum did not reconvene until February this year. Almost all of the Convention's 1,000-plus delegates are hand-picked by the military government, which lost a 1990 election by a landslide. They have refused to cede power to the democratically elected leader - Ms Suu Kyi.

### ILO LOSING PATIENCE WITH BURMA ON FORCED LABOUR

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has said it is losing patience with Burma's military junta and has given the regime until June 2005 to make progress on reducing forced labour practice. The junta has repeatedly failed to fulfil its pledges in regard to this serious matter. The warning came in a written statement at the end of a meeting of the ILO governing body on 24 March and it called on member states to reconsider economic sanctions against Burma. A conference of the ILO's full membership will be given a report in early June outlining any further steps taken by the junta.

The meeting was attended by Geneva-based Burmese ambassador U Nyunt Maung Shein who insisted that the junta has the desire to cooperate with the ILO.

The governing body said it did not want to close the door on the Burmese authorities and it is going to watch for the "last time" whether the junta is going to fulfil its pledges.

### TOTAL Oil: Fuelling the oppression in Burma

On 21 February, BAI's sister organisation, the Burma Campaign UK, published a hard-hitting new report exposing how the French oil company TOTAL plays a role in funding and protecting Burma's military dictatorship. The report **TOTAL Oil : Fuelling the oppression in Burma**, coincides with the launch of a global campaign against the company, supported by 40 organisations in 18 countries including Ireland.

#### Key findings of the report include:

- TOTAL as the largest European corporate funder of the regime. The Yadana gas project, in which it is a partner, is believed to earn the regime between \$200m to \$450m a year.
- TOTAL's presence in Burma, influencing French, European Union and British foreign policy on Burma, as France vetoes effective EU sanctions in order to protect TOTAL.
- Horrific human rights abuses committed in the region of TOTAL's gas pipeline by pipeline security forces.
- Arms sales closely linked to TOTAL's gas project. The regime used its first downpayment for gas exports to buy 10 MIG jets from Russia.

"TOTAL has done more than any other company to help prop up the regime in Burma", says report co-author **John Jackson**, Director of the Burma Campaign UK. "The French government is protecting TOTAL's interests in Burma by blocking tough EU sanctions against the dictatorship. The consequence of TOTAL's Burma operation is that the regime knows it is safe from any tough EU action". In 2004, France vetoed a proposed EU ban on new investment in Burma's oil and gas sectors in order to protect TOTAL's investment in the country. The USA banned new investment in 1997.

## Putting democracy into practice *By Peter Dorman, staff member with CAN*

Community Action Network or CAN is a small not-for-profit Dublin based organisation which has been working since 1987, for social equality through community development in Ireland. While our main focus is community development work and education in Ireland, CAN occasionally undertakes overseas work. Over the past two years, we have been working together with the Burmese government-in-exile National Reconciliation Programme (NRP) on a specific democratic leadership programme.

The aim of this programme is to promote the theory and practice of democratic leadership within the Burmese democracy movement. Everyone within the movement has, in their hearts, the aspiration of a meaningful democracy in Burma. But people will readily agree that democracy is an everyday activity. It is not alone the creation of mechanisms for choosing representatives. It is the commitment to embrace inclusion, consensus building and shared leadership in the everyday activities of organisations.

The programme idea grew out of CAN's use of participative education methodologies when delivering a specific programme of management training as part of an NRP/Institute of Public Administration (Ireland) initiative in Thailand in 2002. Participants

involved in that specific programme said the methodology was most relevant to their situation, and requested the opportunity to learn more about how to work in this way.

Consequently, a Development Cooperation Ireland-supported Training of Trainers scheme began in Thailand. Trainees learned the theory of participative education and developed skills in delivering workshops. CAN designed a Democratic Leadership workshop - a vehicle for promoting democratic leadership within the movement.

In February 2005, CAN road tested the workshop with senior leaders in the Burmese democracy movement. Initially, the trainees expressed concern that the leaders might not embrace the methodology - as many were used to more top-down styles of leadership. The senior leaders however enthusiastically endorsed the programme.

The programme comes to a close at the end of 2005. Trainees are already planning to deliver 10 Democratic Leadership workshops in their own Thai-Burma border based communities, in 2006. They

remain amazingly enthusiastic about the programme. This is because they see training not as an end in itself, but as a strategy for transforming the culture of leadership within the movement, a vision that is close to their hearts.

To find out more about the work of CAN both at home and abroad contact:  
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24 Gardiner Place, Dublin 1, Ireland  
Tel + 353 1 8788005, Fax + 353 1 8788034  
admin@canaction.ie  
www.canaction.ie

The work of CAN is funded by Development Corporation Ireland through an Irish agency.



Participants in a democratic leadership workshop led by CAN trainers, Peter Dorman and Pat Tobin. (Chiang Mai, Thailand, February 2005).



## Burma Action Ireland Newsletter

### Job Vacancy:

## BAI seeks a Coordinator

Burma Action Ireland stalwart John Copley, who has been our Coordinator since 2003, is planning to move on, and BAI is now seeking a replacement. The Coordinator's role is part time (19 hours per week) and involves the coordination of BAI's main activities, including political lobbying, raising public awareness, organising campaigns and fundraising events. Applicants should be highly motivated and have good project management and communication skills. Suitable candidates would include those with a background in the voluntary/NGO sector. Please send a CV and a letter outlining your interest in the post by email to: [info@burmaactionireland.org](mailto:info@burmaactionireland.org). Further details including a job specification are available at: [www.burmaactionireland.org](http://www.burmaactionireland.org)

## AGM Notice

The AGM of Burma Action Ireland will take place on **Monday 16 May at 7.30pm** in Loreto Hall, 77 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. All are very welcome to attend on the evening. Agenda items will include: a short video presentation, the Chairperson's Report, the report of the BAI Coordinator and the Treasurer's Report. The election of the officers will also take place, including the roles of: Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary, among others. Refreshments will be served. If you require any further information please contact John Copley at the BAI contact details below.

## What can you do?

### Get Involved

BAI is always pleased to welcome new members. Members are encouraged to become active in one of BAI's four voluntary sub-committees: **political, awareness raising; campaigns and fundraising and assistance.** The AGM on 16 May is an opportunity for you to hear about our work. Please contact BAI (number given below) if you would like to speak to someone in advance of the AGM.

In addition, there are other ways you can help the people of Burma:

### Birthday Card to Daw Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi celebrates her 60th birthday on **19 June 2005**. Please send a birthday card to her voicing your support for her release. She is the world's only imprisoned peace prize laureate: Her address in Burma is: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Number 54/56 University Avenue, Bahan Township, Rangoon, Union of Myanmar.

### Pen to Paper - Politicians

Write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr **Dermot Ahern**, TD (Iveagh House, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2), your local TD

and/MEP to let them know of your concern for human rights in Burma. Urge them to raise the Burma issue at every level of the political process and:

- To demand that the military regime be totally transparent about the numbers of deaths in Burma from the recent tsunami in Asia and ask for the immediate and unhindered access by aid agencies to their country,
- Take all necessary measures toward a speedy restoration of democracy in Burma,
- Demand the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

### Pen to Paper - Regarding the central issue of the oppression of the Burmese people

Write appeals to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) the Burmese military regime, calling for the safe release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all Burmese political prisoners. In addition to asking for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, please ask the SPDC to take action on the following:

- To be totally transparent about the numbers of deaths in Burma from the December tsunami in Asia and ask for the immediate and unhindered access

by aid agencies to their country,

- To end the continuing violations of the human rights of women, in particular forced labour, forced relocations, abuse, torture, sexual violence, exploitation and abuse in detention and summary executions, often committed by military personnel,
- To end the systematic forced displacements of persons and the flow of refugees to neighbouring countries and create adequate conditions for their safe and voluntary return and complete reintegration, and to allow humanitarian personnel safe access to assist their return and reintegration.

Please address your action letters to the following:

Lieutenant General Soe Win  
Prime Minister,  
State Peace and Development Council  
Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road  
Dagon Post Office, Yangon  
Union of Myanmar

BAI would appreciate it very much if you could send us a copy of your letter(s).

## Burma Action Ireland

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Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are those of Burma Action Ireland and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of Development Cooperation Ireland.

Thank you to Máire Hocht, TD, Senator Paschal Mooney and Senator Brendan Ryan for the posting of this newsletter. Their support is appreciated.

Burma Action Ireland is a voluntary group established since May 1996 to raise awareness in Ireland of the current situation in Burma and the nature of the ruling regime.

Hon. President:  
John Boorman

Chairperson:  
Hugh Baxter

